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The new Roman circus

The trial of eight men for conspiring to shoot Pope John Paul II is filling a courtroom in Rome, and might fill the Coliseum. It easily ranks as the greatest show on earth; along with international terrorism and the attempted murder of a world figure, it combines a high-stakes legal duel and elements of a circus.

Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who shot the Pope in 1981, is trying to convince the court and the world that he is crazy. If he succeeds, the defendants—three Bulgarians and five Turks, including Mr. Agca—will have a good chance at acquittal, and a number of Bulgarian and Soviet officials will breathe much easier.

In the earlier trial that led to his conviction and imprisonment for life, Mr. Agca's testimony implicated the Bulgarian secret service, along with a Turkish terrorist group, in the plot to kill the Pope. Almost by necessity that implicated the Soviet KGB, since the Bulgarians would hardly hatch such a plan without Soviet approval. The KGB in 1981 was headed by Yuri Andropov, later president of the Soviet Union. The scenario was so fantastic that many people simply refused to believe it: a superpower whose leader was suspected of personal involvement in a depraved crime. Yet

Mr. Agca's testimony was detailed and fit the known facts; nothing since has shown it to be false.

If the story cannot be disproved, the quickest way to discredit it is to show that Mr. Agca is a lunatic. He has been trying hard to do that. "I am Jesus Christ," he shouted to the court. "I am omnipotent. I announce the end of the world. The world will very soon be destroyed."

Defense attorneys instantly took the cue. "Finally," said one, "the world has seen by whom the accusations were made." Mr. Agca's antics also minimize any embarrassment for the Soviet bloc; if the eight are convicted, the Communist press will be able to denounce a verdict based on the ravings of a madman (and one clearly deranged by religion, another propaganda score for the Communists). The intriguing question is how Mr. Agca might have been persuaded to put on this show. What was the bargain, and how was it offered to him?

The prosecution now faces the problem of proving sane a person who seems determined to prove himself insane. And the court must try to keep on a rational level a trial that the whole Soviet bloc wants to turn into a farce. All concerned will need a lot of staying power.